born efficient, got ambition, sorta vicious by boltplum

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Summary:

Billy Hargrove is the newest leading driver for Red Bull, but his first season with the team is put in jeopardy when he can't keep himself from punching Jonathan Byers out after a race. Given one chance to place second or better in La Castellet, or else lose everything he's worked for, Billy finds himself pushing the limits in the race of his career against the King of Ferrari, Steve Harrington.

It only gets more complicated from there.

born efficient, got ambition, sorta vicious

Author's Note:

> LISTEN my one niche interest is Formula 1. I don't know everything about the mechanics of racing, but I try, and this is one of my favorite stories I've written so I hope you enjoy.
>
> I have recently started my foray into the healthcare industry so as I'm nervously awaiting externship placement, I wrote for the first time in forever. Let me know what you think, even if you know nothing about F1.
>
> Title from Clouds (Edit) by NF.

Hopper is already sitting, halfway through his steak and fries, fork dripping bloody juice down his chin. Billy knows he's not *that* late. Not like usual. He knows this is important. Hell, every meeting is important, but this meeting? Supreme importance. Gargantuan.

It's because he already suspects what's coming.

Hopper's eyes land on him, raking dully up and down his racing overalls, half undone and tucked at the waist, as he approaches. He sits down hard in the opposing metal seat and ignores the sun in his eyes. Nods his chin down sharp to make his shades slot into place. So he can't see. So Hopper can't see him.

Hopper does, though. Jim's always been a son of a bitch that way.

"Nice of you to show up," he comments around more meat. Billy wants to take his fork and his knife and throw them into the surrounding diners.

"Had nothing else I was doing."

There's a table just behind Hopper. They're staring.

Billy bites the tip of his tongue and lowers his head.

“You made quite the scene,” Hopper says. “I caught the third act just before lunch.”

“Oh yeah?” Billy’s knuckles are still stinging. Byers is still bleeding out on the tarmac. “I practiced my lines extra and everything.”

Hopper’s smiling. Grinning, actually. He leans back and crosses his big arms, staring Billy down like he knows exactly where he has to hit to rip out his spine. The guy probably could.

“You’re just the operator.”

“Which makes it my job to keep you safe. Keep everyone *safe*. You driving like an absolute maniac may be good about ninety-five percent of the time, but that last five percent? *Hoo* boy. You’re pushing buttons, kid, and not just mine.”

“Owens doesn’t give a shit about me.”

That drops the grin off the asshole’s face.

“Owens brought you in.” Billy knows that. “Owens *asked* for *you*,” Hopper adds, lowering his voice.

Billy did not know that.

“Huh.” There’s a tingle in Billy’s hands. He makes fists and stuffs them into each elbow, mirroring the man across from him. “How’s his investment stacking up to the King out there?”

The diners still staring jump, flinching at the palm Hopper slaps against the table. His silverware clinks together, scattering across his plate.

They finally turn away, back to their food. Billy’s just another nobody.

“You wipe that little smirk off your face before one of those monkeys outside land a shot worth headlines.” Hopper’s pointing at him now, voice still dangerously low. “Starting fights with your rival isn’t--”

“Jonathan Byers is *not* my rival,” Billy scoffs. He glares over the rim

of his shades to stare Hopper down. “He’s a fucking nobody. Can’t race for shit. Relies on tows to get him behind the guy who *actually* knows how to do his goddamn job.”

“And who towed him today?” Billy sneers, looking away. “Oh yeah, that was you. Huh.”

Billy’s leg bounces. He needs to get outside. Needs air. Doesn’t need all these eyes and ears on him and his business.

The thing about Jim Hopper is he’s smart. Wily. A grade-A prick who’s got the trust and the ear of the owner, Owens. Owens trusts his team with Hopper as if it’s his own life in those big hands, and the kicker is Hopper *is* trustworthy. He’s a good guy.

It makes Billy’s teeth grind together thinking about it.

Hopper understands people. Understands Billy. Understands the easiest way to control the wildcard of the season is to force him to meet in public. Diners, restaurants, upscale establishments, once even a Russian opera. The guy had squeezed himself into a suit and everything.

Billy wants to throw things and scream and draw more blood, more pain, throw more anger into the world around him, because it’s always easier than this. Than sitting and pretending everything’s all good, all fine, play nice with the big wigs and he’ll be allowed back in the driver’s seat.

So he plays nice.

“I could give the guy a hundred extra miles of pace and he still couldn’t place first,” Billy hisses out. He needs this to be *done* . “Harrington won’t ever let his second pass him up for a win.”

“Harrington’s got ninety-nine wins as of this afternoon,” Hopper says simply. As if Billy needs the reminder. “He’s well on his way to a hundred regardless if it’s you or Byers behind him. And with you two drawing blood on the circuit out there, I don’t see him having much distraction to keep him from breaking that record.”

“Harrington is *Harrington*. Nobody can catch up to that many poles or

wins in one season, let alone me. I'm the new kid, remember? The piece of shit Owens apparently saw something in--thanks for letting that one slip, by the way--something worthy enough to go up against the King of Formula racing. Nobody's ever beat him. Nobody ever will."

"That doesn't sound like you."

His knuckles sting. "Call it an off day."

"Kid," Hopper sighs, all fire drained and replaced with something aggravatingly *fatherly* that Billy can't stand it. "You have the potential--"

"Look, you old fuck." Billy stands sharply, shoving his chair back. Staring now, so much staring. "Harrington is Ferrari. I'm just Red Bull. I'm *me* and he's *him*, and no matter how many stuck-up drivers I knock teeth out of, or how many podiums I place, it means shit in the face of perfect pretty boy King Italia down there. And yeah, sure, maybe I do want to beat his pretty face in now and again, but I'd love to beat him out for P1 way fucking more. But that won't happen. It can't. Because I'm me," he shouts, "and he's him! I don't give a flying fuck what team I'm on or who's car I'm in, if I can't beat Steve Harrington then what does it fucking matter!"

Hopper's plate goes flying. Billy grabs a wayward steak knife and jambs it into the table.

The patrons gasp.

Hopper just sighs again.

Brightest driver I've seen in a decade, Owens, Hopper said once, when they first met. *Intuitive. All grace and control on those turns out there. If we have a shot at the championship, it's him next season, not Hagan.*

When Billy flees, all he can see is a sea of phones, held up and poised to capture his red-faced fury.

Shit.

--

A newspaper lands on top of his breakfast the next morning. It's six and he'd been yawning, trying his best to shovel down eggs and potatoes before the next round of interviews he'll be shoved at for the day.

UPSTART BILLY HARGROVE DOESN'T GIVE A FLYING F* CK WHAT TEAM HE RACES FOR, BEGINNING OF THE END?

Beneath it is a picture taken inside the restaurant. It's him storming away from Hopper, hand up, as if reaching out to shove away people in front of him, his glare front and center. He would have never--

"And here," Robin says, throwing down another.

ASTON MARTIN RED BULL'S STAR THROWS HIS HORNS INTO FERRARI'S JONATHAN BYERS, BLOODYING THE PADDOCK

"It wasn't in the paddock," he explains. "Exactly."

Robin plants her hands on the table, tapping the picture. It's Byers reeling back from being socked in the face. There's blood in a blur shooting to the pavement as Billy's pictured throwing himself forward and snarling.

"They got my good side."

Robin *uh-huhs* him. "I thought so too. Nice right hook."

"Thank you."

She drops another paper on the table. Another front pager.

It's a picture of Harrington. He's in the cockpit of the new SF21. All sleek curves and sharp points. His face is hidden beneath his helmet, fist up in the air with his index aimed for the clouds.

Number one.

SCUDERIA FERRARI'S KING PRIMED FOR RECORD HUNDREDTH WIN IN LA CASTELLET

Billy gathers the papers up and tosses them toward the other end of

the table. He picks up his fork.

“They still print the paper?”

Robin huffs and sits beside him. “You’re seriously not concerned about any of this?”

“‘Course I am. Look at me.” He stuffs eggs in his mouth. “Picture of concern right here.”

“You broke his nose.”

Did he? That was news.

“He deserved it.”

“No he didn’t.”

“Buckley.”

“Hargrove.” She kicks her feet up on a free chair. “You’re playing with fire.”

“They do call me hot.”

She rolls her eyes and shoves at his shoulder. “Hot-blooded, more like.”

“Just ‘cuz you’re into chicks doesn’t mean you can’t see the truth. I’m fucking smokin’.”

It gets her to laugh. He smiles.

“Besides,” he says. “They can’t fire me. I’m all they’ve got.”

“Excuse you.”

“No offense,” he adds.

“All offense taken,” she throws back. “We’re in a precarious enough place as it is, Billy. Two Americans in F1, on the same team, one of them a woman and the other a guy who throws punches as often as he signs fan merch? Come on.”

“It’s not that often. And way to sell yourself short.” He swallows and pushes his plate out. She starts picking at his scraps. A leftover vulture. “There have been women in F1 before.”

“Not for almost half a century.” She flicks a bit of egg his way. “You need to rein it in. Don’t ruin it for the other kids.”

“Don’t piss in the sandbox?”

“Exactly,” she says. “It’s such a fun sandbox after all. Filled with so much adrenaline and money and worldwide adoration.”

“You race for all the right reasons, Buck.”

“Says the guy who caught on fire before his season even started. I seem to recall you hollering about it being the biggest rush of your life. Said you were in the big leagues now.”

Billy can’t help but drain some, a rush of fondness for his friend overtaking his need to get out from under her appraisal.

Still.

“So what do you propose I do, then? We’ve got qualifying in a couple hours. I know I’m pretty awesome, but how much damage control do you think I’m capable of?”

“Not nearly as much as Hop seems to think. Don’t you think it’s kind of weird you had to see these headlines from me? I vote you talk to your crush.”

He rubs his hands over his face. Stands up and starts fishing around his room for his racing overalls.

Billy catches her eye as she watches him get race ready. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like you’re a dumb horny idiot who can’t talk to the cute boy on the playground? Okay.”

“Byers is not the,” he throws up air quotes, “*cute boy on the playground*.”

“Wasn’t talking about him.”

“Then I don’t know who you mean.”

“You do,” she insists, calm. “Or have you forgotten that one time I walked in on you on your phone watching that 2018 interview with your hand down your—”

“We’re not talking about this.” He turns away and hops into his pants. Zips himself up from navel to throat. Or tries to. It gets stuck at his ribs, refusing to budge no matter how hard he pulls.

“We need to talk about it eventually. Your less than tiny crush? It’s causing problems for everybody now. For the company. You’re stupid if you think they’re going to ignore this.”

“We’ve got qualifying, Robin. There’s no time.” He grunts as he tugs. “This damn thing won’t go.”

“Then make the time. Your career could be on the line,” she says, standing up. She walks up to him and takes the zip herself. Gets it unstuck and to his chin in a second. “Just talk to the guy. He’s not nearly as awful as you make him out to be.”

He narrows his eyes. Pulls the zip down so he can breathe.

Something about the way she says it has him suspicious. Tells him he’s not seeing the whole picture. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She smiles. “Nothing you think it might, bub. Talk to him. Air out whatever weird grievances you have. And after that call up Owens and deliver an overzealous, *sincere* apology about yesterday before he has a chance to send Hop after you. Promise never to lose your cool again and race your best today and *move on*. Do it for me?”

Billy puts on his best pout. He grabs up his friend’s hands, squeezing them to his chest. “And here I thought next you’d be asking me to kiss and make up with Byers.”

Her eyes light up. “That wouldn’t hurt.”

He kisses her knuckles before dropping them and says, “Screw you,

Buckley."

As she's making her way back out of his room, she smacks her ass. "You wouldn't know how to handle me, Hargrove!"

--

The south of France's heat reminds him of San Diego in the early summer. Hot enough to make you sweat, cool enough to fool kids into thinking if they swam for a couple hours they wouldn't get sunburnt. Billy was always one of those kids. Lived most of his life before ten as red as a cherry. He didn't care. Better to be a little burned, wild, and out of the house than stuck inside and at the wrath of two vitriolic parents that couldn't stand each other.

Then Neil up and moved them to San Francisco after the divorce. Billy took off at fifteen and fell in love with karting. Scratched and clawed and fucked his way into the office of some suit who actually mattered. Who got him a racing gig.

Life flew by from there.

Billy's been officially on the inside of Formula racing for a long time, on the inside of Formula 1 since last year. He started this season strong. He's still strong. One of the best. But he's got issues.

Issues Hopper's laid out in a neat file folder he hands to Billy. It's Hopper and Robin and Billy in the garage, getting their last checks in before quali.

It's a list of formal complaints against him. These would have to have come from inside the team. Inside the company. Not Robin, she would never go behind his back like this. She wasn't the type. Hopper? He doesn't know. Billy thinks he wouldn't.

Hard to handle.

Difficult to work with.

Empty beer bottles seen during room service before big races.

Hotheaded.

Bad tempered.

Mean.

Cruel.

Rude.

Ignores direction when racing. Runs the engine too hot. Risk.

Doesn't appreciate the pit crew.

Lashes out at the car when he's angry. Undoes months of work in a blink.

Doesn't care about the sport. No respect for the art of racing.

That's the one that gets under his skin. Picks at his bones. Makes him pissed more than panicked. He cares. He's always cared. That's why he gets so fucking angry when things don't go his way.

When things aren't fair.

Robin warned him this would happen. She knew one day it would all come crashing down for him.

He's sick to his stomach.

"Can't this wait until after the race?" Robin tries. She even goes so far as to step between them. "We're pretty busy here, Hop."

"Out of the way, Robin," he sighs. "I don't want to be doing this either, but as your operator I have to."

"Hop--"

"Buckley," he says, firm and unwavering. "Move aside. This has nothing to do with you and you'd be smart to keep it that way."

Robin dips her head. Her fingers flex where she holds her hands up. Then she runs them through her hair, steps aside. Won't meet Billy's eyes.

“Firing me before a race is bad PR,” Billy tells him, straight to the point and calmer than even he thought he’d be.

“Good thing the company has put that decision in my hands, because I don’t *want* to fire you, kid. Do consider this your first, second, and third official warning though. You’ve been marked. Owens and the investors have been willing to overlook the middling complaints in this file since the season started, but after yesterday they’re not so keen on you anymore.”

Against his better judgment, his pulse picks up. Hope courses through him.

“So what is this? What the hell does that mean?”

“First, tell me what went down on the paddock yesterday. Why did you and Byers get into it?”

Billy clams up. He can’t. He won’t. He refuses.

The last thing he needs is a social media frenzy on top of everything else.

“That’s between me and Byers. It won’t happen again.”

Hopper considers him. Points at the file. “And what about all that?”

“Won’t happen again.”

“Good.” Hopper nods. Billy lets out a held breath when Hopper steps away, as if to leave. But then he stops. “Owens like you. He doesn’t want to see his team lose you either.”

“He’s too nice a guy to make the call. That’s why he sends you to do his dirty work.”

Hopper smirks. “Sure. But I think it’s more than that. If he could, he’d pay to keep the people he likes on his team forever. I think it’s the biohumanist in him. All those years working in labs made him a thinker, not rich. Feelings are only so strong against deep pockets. The investors make the rules.”

Billy snorts. “I know that.”

“Watch the tone, remember? Smile. Be nice. Be…*merry*, even. Hell, something other than what you’ve been putting out lately. Work with me, Billy.”

Or what, he wants to shoot back, to challenge. He hates being doubted. Hates being looked down on, like he’s nothing, a nobody, somebody not even worth seeing.

Here, on the inside of the greatest sport in the world, he wants to be someone. He wants to be everything.

Out there? Doesn’t matter. Against Steve Harrington, he needs to win. Needs to prove he’s more than just the asshole in a helmet with his foot on the pedal.

So when he grits out, “I’ll try,” he means it.

Hopper nods. “Good,” he says again. “Because if you don’t, you’re out.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got the message. Loud and crystal fucking clear, pal.”

Hopper tilts his head. Starts for the open air, the burning sun just out of the garage. The crew has been giving them their space, but with Hopper’s signaled leave they’ll be filing back in like red-backed flies.

Before he’s far enough away for the others to overhear, Hopper says, “No, kid. Today’s it. You place any worse than P2, you’re out.”

It’s like vertigo. Everything rushes down, down toward his feet and out into the cement. He wants to lay on the tarmac and wilt. Melt right down to blood and bone.

“So that’s your decision!” Billy can’t help but shout. “Just like that? After everything?”

Robin’s already working to shush him. He can’t. He won’t.

Better to fucking burn.

“That’s my decision, kid,” Hopper calls. He turns. “Prove me wrong!”

It’s a beat before the file is being taken from him. Before Robin is saying something he can’t hear to someone he can’t even look at, can’t even see. Everything is black, narrowed, all tunnel vision as she steers him inside.

One shot. He has one shot to stake his claim and tell the company, the world, he belongs here just as much as anyone else.

Place second or he’s out. Done. Nothing.

“Now’s not the best time,” Robin’s saying over his head. Of course it’s not the best time.

“Of course it’s not,” he mutters. She’s led him into the small conference room beyond the garage. In here, with the door closed he can’t even hear the crew working their magic over the car. “This isn’t fair. This isn’t fucking fair.”

“I know,” she’s saying. “Can you just wait…no? Wow, okay.” She’s back on him then.

All he can think of is the tricky speed trap, the hard turns.

“Paul Ricard’s hard,” he says. “If I want to make P2 I have to brake light and put all the power in the speed of the car, gotta lean on the engine. I have to hit those early turns without sacrificing any pace--I have to--Robin, I can’t fuck this up. I *have* to push it harder than I ever have before.”

She squeezes his shoulder. “Our grip is good but not good enough to keep you from flipping.” When he focuses, when his breathing is back under his control, he expects to bring his gaze up and meet hers. Instead, she’s looking behind him, strained, her mouth pinched.

“Paul Ricard’s a hard circuit,” comes a voice that isn’t Robin’s. “But you’ve got it all backwards.”

Billy swallows. Robin glances at him before dropping her hand to the table.

Steve Harrington circles around Billy's seat, taking the chair in front of him. He places a finger on the table and draws a line that bellows out into a curve.

His eyes are brown and bright and wide as he traces the first lap of the circuit.

"There's a nice straight line up until turn one," he explains. "You have to brake hard before the turn, then punch it. Use every straight line to build the power you need before reining it in. Brake hard and fast, and brake late. Always late. The earlier you brake will slow you down. Show the car who's in control. Keep tight to the left shoulder here." He traces an invisible curve marking turn two to three. "Avoid the right shoulder as much as you can. This is your first time racing La Castellet, and it's hard to see in videos--it's bumpy. The track is bumpy, here, here," and in his overeager demeanor, he forgets where they are, who they are, picks up Billy's hand like it's nothing, like they aren't on opposing teams, and places it down in a mirror to his own. "And here."

He releases Billy, eyes still on the invisible map under his hands.

"If you brake slow or not at all, you'll flip your car and toss yourself to the wind. Byers broke a hand there three years ago making the same mistake."

Billy squints. "That wasn't reported."

"Because I kept it out of the headlines. He raced with it wrapped under his glove for the whole season. It worked, he kept his career, but it doesn't work like a normal hand does." Harrington shakes his head, his mass of wavy hair falling into his eyes. "You don't want to make the same mistake, man. Trust me."

Billy blinks, absorbing the rush of information.

It's good advice. It's learned. He'd be stupid not to take it.

Something occurs to him then.

"Wait. You're not Italian."

“Huh?”

“Your--your accent. Your Italian mafioso, *I’m such an ego-riddled talented second-twice-removed-bumfuck-cousin to Enzo himself* Italian accent. It’s missing.”

“I--uh. Rob?”

“Rob?” Billy turns to her, questioning. “Explain. Now. Why is he even here?” He turns back to Harrington. “Why are you even here? You’ll get us all fined.”

“Um. Talking to other racers isn’t illegal in Formula racing.”

Billy smooths his palms out on the table’s surface, gesturing vaguely toward Harrington’s unseen display. “Trading insider secrets is.”

“This is hardly spying,” Robin supplies.

“Nobody needs to know,” Harrington says sagely, nodding. He beams at Robin and Billy hates it.

“We have twenty minutes until qualifying,” he groans, pinching at his brow. “Why are you all buddy buddy with Steve Harrington and *why* is Steve Harrington in our building, and *why are you not Italian*?”

“I *am* Italian,” Harrington says, easy as pie. “And Rob and I go way back.”

What.

“What?”

It’s Robin’s turn to look sheepish. “We sort of grew up together.”

“Wait. *You’re* Italian?”

Harrington laughs, bubbly and startling. Billy’s never heard the guy laugh like this before.

“No, no. My folks sent me off to live in the US when I was still in diapers. It wasn’t conducive to their budgetary plan for Ferrari to

have a toddler running around ruining their lives. They didn't need the distraction." He shrugs, like that isn't one of the most pathetic things Billy's ever heard. "Rob and I met karting just outside of Chicago."

"That fancy kid's club for up and coming racers?"

He knows about it. Of course he knows about it. Robin rarely shut up about it when she was first signed to Red Bull. Piles of awards from karting growing up, that one.

Harrington sits back in his seat, biting at his lower lip as he thinks.

"Come to think of it, never saw you there. You don't get into F1 without winning karts."

Billy can't hold it back. It's been a bad day.

"You do when you can't afford it," he snaps. "Come crying to me about worth when you don't have all that money backing you up making you what you are."

"Billy," Robin chastises him. "Do not fuck this up. Talk to him," she hisses.

She gets up and leaves them alone, the door slamming shut. She's pissed, and for plenty good reason.

Still, though.

Harrington smiles softly, unaffected by Billy's outburst. "I put on an accent for the cameras. I lost it around five years old, I think. When I came back to start racing, I was...*advised*, to get it back. It's just for show more than anything. And for my grandma to understand me when I try to speak what little Italian I know over the holidays."

He can picture it. Little Steve Harrington with a head full of thick brown hair, running around trying to be a good kid for parents who didn't even want him. Who put him on a plane to be raised on another continent so they could, what? Work? Make money?

Compare that to the videos of the guy Billy's seen racing in karts,

winning. Those early F2 races, and finally his star-throttled launch into the big leagues. The fastest driver the sport's ever seen. The smoothest.

In interviews, Harrington's a charmer. Smiles lopsided and handsome, toys with his thick hair, smooths a solid hand down his mole-dotted throat. Works the flirtation layer by layer until he's got whoever's holding the mic red in the face and stumbling over their rehearsed questions.

In the paddock he's another person.

In the paddock, Harrington's all business. Serious. Not much of a talker. All laser-edged focus set to burn whoever disturbs him from whatever routine he's built for himself over his long career. Eight years in F1 and only twenty-seven. The guy's got a contract signed with blood, each paycheck stamped with nepotism, and a racing record shiny enough to keep him firmly in the grips of job security, so long as he can outlive the mortality rate.

He drives like he's flying, like he was born flying, and that's just the truth of it.

Here and now, Harrington is someone else altogether. That laser focus is all on Billy now, burning for another reason entirely. Something that makes his blood boil and his heart thump with a thing he'd dare to name possibility. But Harrington's not like that. He doesn't fuck around. He doesn't even like men, from what Billy's gathered. It's an impossible desire.

And still Harrington is a different sort of beast sitting across from him now. Not the charmer, but nonetheless charming. Not the intimidating enemy, but someone who carries history and skill on his shoulders. So much so it's almost impossible not to feel outdone.

He knows his shit. It's why he's good.

Billy's been blowing hot air, and he's sorry for the first time in too long. He doesn't like being sorry.

"Sorry," he only just manages. "You're good."

Harrington's eyes twinkle. "I know."

Okay.

Okay, fuck.

Brown eyes flick across Billy's face. "Byers is pissed you broke his nose."

"That's true?" He grimaces. "I thought Robin was joking."

He should have been fired on the spot. Christ.

Harrington shrugs. His red racing suit is done entirely up. Safe. Cozy. Looks good on him with his long torso, longer legs. The picture of Hollywood handsome, if Billy were being honest with himself.

"He deserved it."

Billy can't have heard him right.

Another shrug. Those brown eyes are cast away, sent to some middle distance through Billy's chest. "Wouldn't be the first time Jonathan opened his big mouth. Guy can be mean when he wants. We all can, right?"

"Guy must have had a real bug up his ass that day then, I guess."

Harrington snorts a laugh. It's ungainly. Funny. "Probably. Guy can be a stickler when it comes to certain things. He's a lot like this friend we have...you know not many know this but we got into it back in the day. Right when he started, I'd been with the team for a few years already but Jonathan was new. Ready to prove himself. Called me out for something stupid I did, something real mean--he beat the shit out of me before I even got a punch in."

Billy whistles. "And he kept his job? What the hell did you do?"

Harrington smiles fondly. Makes Billy go all warm.

"Nothing I didn't already know wasn't right. You see, Byers has this thing. He's really good at getting the truth out of people. Calls them

out for bullshit. Sees clearly things I can't, that's for damn sure. He just doesn't always know the best way to get those things across."

Cold washes up his spine. Truth. Billy hates liars, always has and always will, and he hates himself for keeping a lie that's necessary. He likes to think it cancels things out in the long run.

Make money now. Live for the ride. Enjoy himself and his life after, if he doesn't manage to go up in a ball of steel and flames by the end of his contract.

Hell, by the end of the race today.

"Well you can tell Byers he won't have to worry much about me anymore."

Harrington frowns, a wrinkle forming between his brows. He refocuses, bringing his eyes back to Billy's.

"What do you mean?"

"I fucked up. I have one more race to prove to the owner I'm not a hack."

The wrinkle doesn't smooth out. It should be good news for Harrington. For the whole of the racing industry.

"What? You're a beast out there, they can't expect you to--"

The flattery makes him laugh, hollow and humorless. "I make P2 or I'm out. Yesterday I fucked up. I fucked up bad. And with you and Byers dominating like you have been, I've got no chance. If I'm out, I'm out."

"No," Harrington tells him, like he believes it. "You'd be picked up and signed by the end of the week with one of the others. Hagan? That old teammate of yours that went to Renault. He'd be demoted if they got their chance to sink their teeth into you."

"I don't exactly have a lot of friends here. And I don't have the money to stay and lurk, follow Robin around the world to see her race. I have nobody, Harrington," he says, bitter and not bothering to

hide it. “No family back in the states. No friends worth keeping there. No money to hang around every circuit like some hungry dog waiting for the scraps of a pity contract. After today, I’m out. Simple as that.”

The wrinkle deepens into something that makes Billy curious. He doesn’t know why Harrington is so bothered with the news of Billy’s departure from the sport. Life would be nothing but easier for him without the guy causing his teammate injuries.

“You’re worried about the next guy, huh? That it? Don’t worry, Robin’s never been big on overtaking you. Second’s good enough for her, next to the King and all. Second’s the best anybody can hope for as long as you’re in the game.”

Harrington’s frown deepens, if possible. He watches Billy with hard eyes as he stands, smoothing his zip down before pulling it down and back up again. A nervous pre-race tic.

Neither of them say anything for a long moment.

Billy is the one who shrugs, starts to back up. “Well, then…guess I’ll see you there.”

“I like your necklace,” Harrington blurts when he’s at the door. Billy pauses with it inches open. Harrington gestures to his own neck. “You religious?”

“Hell no,” Billy says, and something in Harrington’s face makes him smile. “You mean what you said?”

“About?”

“Not knowing much Italian?”

Harrington’s eyes shine when he smiles. “*Oggi guiderai magnificamente. Hai il sangue dello sport in te, non importa quello che qualsiasi azienda dice con un pezzo di carta.*”

Billy huffs. “I have no idea what the hell you just said, but I’ll take that as a no.”

Harrington stands, shrugging his shoulders. He’s barely taller than

Billy. “I get by.”

Billy nods, thinking that’s that. This strange interaction will be over and he’ll have made good on his promise to Robin to clear the air. He’ll have cleared his head before the race of his career and what might as well be his life, and have gotten some good advice to boot.

Still.

He closes the door again. Faces Harrington head on. “I *am* sorry. About before. When I said what I did about you only being as good as your money. I know it’s not that. I know you’ve been winning poles since you were old enough to, and I know you’ve got enough awards to fill a Walmart. I know you know that winning doesn’t mean shit. Because when you drive, you’re smiling, you’re having the time of your life. You don’t care if you die out there, because you know you’re too good at what you do to ever risk that. You were born to race, Harrington. And I don’t say that lightly, King or not.”

Harrington licks his lips. Closes his mouth. Has a hard time meeting Billy’s eyes, of all things. He turns--turns *shy*, and Billy can’t wrap his head around it.

“How...how do you know I’m smiling when I drive?”

Billy shrugs and swings the door open. Hot air rushes in against his face, warming him, making his suit cling to his neck.

Harrington’s looking straight at him.

“Because when I’m out there, so am I.”

Author's Note:

> Terms:
>
> Tow: when a car is caught up in the "wind tunnel" behind another car, so essentially the car in front is giving a tow to the other, providing them a faster pace when they eventually pull out and ahead.
> Quali/Qualifying: The race before the real race to determine starting placement for the actual race.

SF21: It's Ferrari's new car for this year, but the fic's timeline is ambiguous and I don't care too much.
P2: second place
Podium: placing third, second, or first
Pole: landing first starting place or P1
Operator: The one who sits and basically manages the techs, pit crew, and driver during the race
Circuit Paul Ricard: the race track at La Castellet which is a tiny little French town
Karting: go karts is often how Formula drivers start

What Steve says in Italian (which I hope google translate has got right): "Today you will drive beautifully. You have the blood of sport in you, no matter what any company says with a piece of paper."